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## **On graphic design: listening to the reader?**

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# *There is a remarkable contradiction in the fact that a professional field that is primarily concerned with the visual presentation of organisations and ideas is hardly able to present an unequivocal image of itself*

## *Brief Summary*

The professional field of 'graphic design' is in need of a more precise definition. This is not only important for the profession itself (clarity for both clients and designers), but also for the educational practice (clarity for both students and teachers).

Initial exploratory studies have yielded the following results:

- **there are many more graphic designers than expected;**
- **their activities are much more varied than expected;**
- **the core activities of the professional field can be described.**

These three results are now being verified in the field, after which specific applications can be developed for graphic design education, research and practice.

The size of the professional field: How many graphic designers are there?

Exploratory studies into the practice of graphic design have resulted in some unexpected insights. Breda, a city of some 140,000 inhabitants, is home to 170 firms that advertise themselves as 'graphic designers'. Besides these, a few hundred graphic designers are employed by other companies that are active in 'visual communications' such as website design, advertising and consultancy, or by communications departments of large organisations. In Breda, probably some 700 people earn a living by working professionally in graphic design.

## Method

Applying a quantitative approach, we first made an inventory of the entire group and then chose a weighted selection. In March 2008, we sent all of the firms a questionnaire. Then we interviewed a dozen design firms about their methods, criteria and professional activities. The results from the first questionnaire and this first series of interviews were then analysed and described. In a second series of interviews, the commissions of five firms were discussed in detail and compared with the descriptions, which enabled us to confirm that the descriptions did match the activities, methods and criteria of commercial graphic design firms as closely as possible.

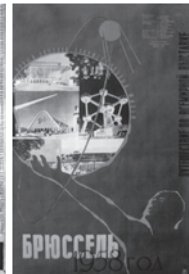
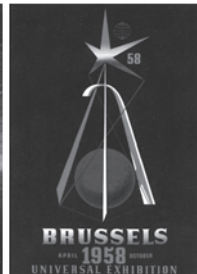
Jacques Richez  
June 1955

30 x 20, 100 x 62,  
120 x 80, 160 x 120 cm  
in 9 languages 500.000 copies  
2nd impression November 1957  
75 x 53 cm 85.000 copies.

Lucien De Roeck  
November 1956  
100 x 62 cm  
500 copies in 3 languages  
then 15.000 in 8 languages

Leo Marfurt  
May 1957  
120 x 90, 90 x 62,  
30 x 20 cm  
in 6 languages

d'Hooghe  
November 1957  
90 x 62 cm  
120.000 copies  
in 4 languages



Paul Ibou (Vermeersch)  
November 1957  
commissioned by Pan Am  
100 x 67 cm

Anonymous 1958  
1958  
film poster  
104 x 65 cm

Figure 1

Six posters for the Brussels 1958 World's Fair by six designers in the order in which they were published. The first four are the winning designs of four consecutive design competitions commissioned by the Fair's Publicity Service, the last two posters were designed for other clients. The posters show visual elements – including a globe, a star, the atomium, the number 58, and Brussels – in various combinations. So in the same context of a World's Fair the balance between representation (content), identity (source) and orientation (aiding the beholder) has been chosen differently. The role the clients played in these designs and the effects on the beholders can only be determined through further study. Nothing can be said about that on the basis of these illustrations.

Source: Karl Scheerlinck, Peter Wever, Robert Lucas, *58 Posters for the World's Fair 58 Brussels*, Plaizier Publishers, Brussels 2008 (a b) collection Wijand Plaizier, Brussels; (c d e) collection Karl Scheerlinck, Antwerp; (f) collection Peter Wever, Rosmalen

The sphere of activity: What do graphic designers do?

From the questionnaire and interviews, it transpired that 'graphic designers' always offer a combination of various activities. Graphic design is the core activity around which some thirty other activities may be grouped. The personality and individual interests of designers are the decisive elements here. Over the course of a person's career, these activities are in flux. The combination of personality and activities gives each firm a unique profile – and it is this profile that attracts clients.

So then, what are the core activities?

In practice, the operating method seems to consist of three integrated processes:

- 1 assessing and evaluating the effects for the client and the beholder;
- 2 determining a visual strategy and achieving the visual goal;
- 3 producing, selecting and combining the visual elements.

Decisions are made simultaneously in all three processes. Graphic design is

**'a commercial service that develops visual means to support the dialogue between clients and their contacts'.**

These three processes are strongly reminiscent of the three forms of visual argumentation:

**visual logic,  
visual rhetoric and  
visual dialectics.**

The relationship between research and graphic design:  
explore first, then establish

In our first quantitative and qualitative explorations, we describe the present situation and set up contact with most of the parties within the scope of our study. Up to this point, we have studied only the framework and the scope: the 'exploratory' stage of a design project.

On the basis of these explorations, we will decide which elements we should study in more detail. These will first be discussed with the interested parties. Then we will establish and describe suitable qualitative and quantitative criteria, mainly to have reference material in a later stage that will enable us to judge whether changes can indeed be labelled as improvements.

At this point, mainly exploratory research is needed. Exploratory research offers an excellent opportunity for the Visual Rhetoric Research Group to find relationships between graphic design practice, design research and scientific research. The results should be useful as a basis for developments in practice as well as in graphic design education. The aim of a research group is, after all, to bring professional practice, research and education closer together.

Headings of a very general nature, such as ‘announcement’, ‘notice’, ‘decree’ and ‘invitation’ may be placed at the top of a poster or advertisement, but it is nonsense to make them stand out typographically.

**An announcement should be composed in such a manner that it is discerned as easily as possible by those at whom it is aimed.**

Force of habit and the desire to find new forms often lead to inefficiency and errors in layout: **originality should not be pursued at the cost of clarity.**

Thus wrote R. van der Meulen in a section on the design of advertisements in *De Courant. Historic and Comparative Survey of Newspapers of all Nations*, A.W. Sijthoff Publishers, Leiden 1884, p 183.

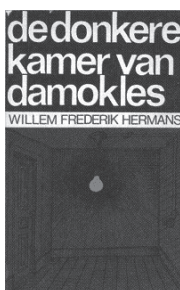
Helmut Salden 1959



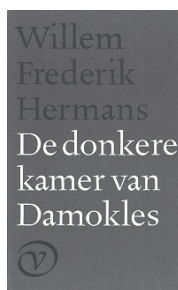
Helmut Salden 1963



Nicolaas Wijnberg 1971



Gerrit Noordzij 1991



Gerrit Noordzij 1994



Collage 2008

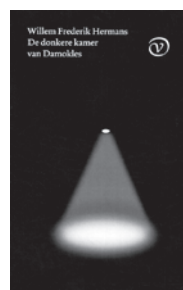
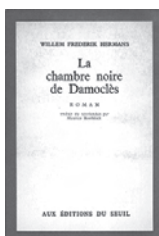
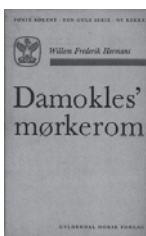
Arne Riise 1961  
Danish editionGraham Bishop 1962  
British/Canadian/  
Australian editionanonymous 1962  
French editionLeif Bülow Berntzen 1962  
Norwegian editionHåkan Engström 1962  
Swedish editionOiva Fyrqvist 1963  
Finnish editionJacek Tofil 1994  
Polish edition

Figure 2

A selection from the book covers that have been designed over the years for the novel *The Dark Room of Damocles* by the Dutch author W.F. Hermans. Each shows a new mix of similar elements (author, book title, publisher), adding an illustration or a photo, as the fashion at the time saw fit. Remarkable in the series of Dutch publications are both the variation in relative size of the author's name and the change in absolute size of typography. The foreign series shows how the visual context (and/or customs in local markets) becomes an important element in the design.

## The situation: conflicting descriptions of a practice?

There are many sources to draw upon in describing the professional field of graphic design. A plethora of books exists on graphic design, including yearbooks presenting the finest results, competitions, studies and critical reflections. But do these publications provide a reliable and adequate description of the practice of graphic design?

### Books on graphic design

Recent books on graphic design, such as

**How To Be A Graphic Designer Without Losing Your Soul** (Shaughnessy, 2005)

**What Is Graphic Design For?** (Twemlow, 2006)

**How To Think Like A Great Graphic Designer** (Millman, 2007)

**Graphic Design This Way** (Anderson & Roberts, 2007) and

**The Fundamentals Of Graphic Design** (Ambrose & Harris, 2009)

give an idea of what graphic designers are currently doing.

These publications describe their activities and present the results.

Gavin Ambrose and Paul Harris (2009)<sup>1</sup> define graphic design as follows:

**‘Graphic design is a broad discipline that encompasses many different aspects and elements. It can be difficult to explain as a fractured discipline because designers work in varied environments and may rarely, or never, engage in some aspects of the practice.’**

In his introduction to Shaughnessy’s book, Stefan Sagmeister (2005)<sup>2</sup> writes:

**‘Of course, as it became a wider discipline, graphic design became more difficult. It embraces what used to be a dozen different professions ...’**

Peter Anderson and Patrick Roberts (2007)<sup>3</sup> describe the professional field as follows:

**‘In truth, the term ‘Graphic Design’ does little to capture the all encompassing current commercial landscape of professional activities for designers and communicators.’**

The authors interviewed renowned graphic designers, introducing them as ‘leading’ designers, ‘cutting-edge’ designers and ‘most influential and revered’ designers. The interviews are often interlaced with personal experiences from graphic design practice and large numbers of case studies. By showing and discussing visual results, these publications create a certain image of the practice.

1 **The Fundamentals of Graphic Design**, Gavin Ambrose and Paul Harris (2009, p 9)

2 Stefan Sagmeister in **How To Be A Graphic Designer Without Losing Your Soul** by Adrian Shaughnessy (2005, p 7)

3 **Graphic Design This Way**, Peter Anderson and Patrick Roberts (2007, p 10)

Most likely, this is a distorted image. For instance, we may conclude from the books mentioned above that most graphic designers work for studios in big cities for international clients. Also, the projected image is quite positive, probably as a result of reproducing a large number of successful examples. Quite remarkably, the descriptions of the professional field in these publications hardly correspond, making them seem rather arbitrary and personal. The short lists of sources in these books – three of the five books mentioned here contain no list of sources at all – make the authors look like pioneers in uncharted territory. However, all five books demonstrate one of the most typical aspects of the professional field: an enormous diversity of activities. Of course, with this observation alone, these texts are of little help to us in defining the ‘boundaries of graphic design’.

### Results: surveys and design awards

A second way of describing the professional field is to look at the results. These can be seen in abundance all around us, in the form of posters, house styles, forms, newspapers, books, magazines, catalogues, labels, packaging and manuals. And also in the form of digital designs, such as websites, displays and program interfaces, and in three-dimensional forms such as signposting, lettering, exhibitions and stands. These are all products that show the hand of ‘graphic designers’.



Figure 3

Cover designs for telephone directories. The 1965 cover is anonymous, reserved. The most use-oriented ones are examples 3 and 4, listing the names of places in the area covered by the directory (cartographically in example 3, as a list in example 4).

After the privatization of the Dutch national service Ptt Telecom the covers primarily advertise the corporate identity (1995, 2004). These six examples demonstrate a shift in emphasis from ‘visual representation’, via ‘visual orientation’ to ‘visual identity’.

Source: collection of Fred Rijlaarsdam, Leiden



Some of these designs are compiled in visual surveys. Every year, beautiful yearbooks and luxury binders are published, presenting an overview of 'the best work'. The **Graphis Annuals**, for instance, is heralded as:

**'All featured work is carefully selected from a pool of entries submitted during our Call for Entry period. Only the most impressive work is selected for inclusion in the Annuals. All chosen entries earn a Graphis Gold Award, now accompanied by a Gold Certificate and a carefully selected few will earn a new Platinum Award for excellence.'**<sup>4</sup>

The announcement of a survey of Dutch design states:

**'The book contains a superb cross-section of the current state of design in the Netherlands, in all its diversity – from functional minimalism to experimental indulgence, and covering all disciplines from graphics and product design to interactive media.'**<sup>5</sup>

Such surveys present 'snapshots' and include inspiring examples. A major drawback of such lists is that they offer us no clue as to whether and in how far their selection is representative of the professional practice as a whole. Selection criteria, if mentioned at all, are usually unclear. Many of these books divide the entries into categories, but this choice of categories is also rarely explained. Comprehensiveness does not seem to be a priority.

Do any of the many design competitions in various media enhance our understanding?

One would expect that in these competitions an effort would be made to define the concept of 'graphic design' – and how one could arrive at such a definition? (LaMere, 2008)<sup>6</sup>

A random selection gives an idea of the number of awards in the Netherlands and the media that are eligible for these awards. In 2008, these included the Theatre Poster Award, the Utrege Diezjnprijs (Utrecht Design Award), the Dutch Design Awards, European Design Awards, the iF Communication Design Awards, the Red Dot Award, the Calendar Competition, the Design Award Rotterdam, the Best Designed Annual Reports, the Best Designed Books, The Best Book Cover, the Effie Communication Award, the ADCN Lamps, the D&AD, the Business Media Grand Prix, the Dutch House Style Award and the Infographics Yearly Award.

Very few of these competitions explicitly state their assessment criteria. Catalijne van Middelkoop<sup>(2008)</sup><sup>7</sup> in **Vormberichten** (the monthly magazine of the Association of Dutch Designers) has voiced her despair over the criteria she has struggled with herself as a jury member:

**'However, my ambition to one day maybe produce something that would meet the undoubtedly severe selection criteria was increasingly frustrated by the question of why some very good designs that were presented to us did not earn a place in the annals.'**

4 **Graphis Annuals** is published by Graphis Inc., New York. Its goal is to publish every year 'the most significant and influential work in design, advertising and photography'. <http://www.graphis.com/cfe/introduction/>

5 Quoted from the announcement of 'My Dutch Design 2008 2009' on the publisher's website <http://www.bispublishers.nl/>

6 Kate Ann LaMere (2008) 'Authorities/Knowledge/Beliefs/Outcomes: "Governing" in the profession of Graphic Design in the US'. **Proceedings of DRS2008**, Design Research Society Biennial Conference, Sheffield, UK. 16-19 July 2008.

7 Catalijne van Middelkoop (2008) 'Te koop: Nominatie' ['For Sale: Nomination'] **Vormberichten** 9(08), p 7.

Yearbooks and design awards probably only present part of the top sector and are therefore not of much use in describing the entire professional field. We do not get to see the results that were not selected, and the same goes for all designs that do not fit in standard categories.

### Research and critical reflections on graphic design

Another way to arrive at an inventory of this professional field is to consult critical writings and research. Surely, these types of publication would at least describe the methods, criteria, effects and functions of graphic design. Again, we are in for a disappointment, as is evident from the following quotes.

In 1988, Jorge Frascara wrote:

**‘Graphic design has existed long enough for its role in society to be easily understood. However, unlike architecture, literature, or the fine arts, it has developed without much theoretical reflection.’**<sup>8</sup>

The five-part series **Looking Closer**, a compilation of no less than 254 articles by 165 authors, was explicitly intended to promote critical reflection on the profession. However, in the introduction to the last issue in 2006, one of the compilers, Steven Heller, sighs:

**‘In short, after all these years graphic design criticism is still in its infancy.’**<sup>9</sup>

In the Netherlands, Carel Kuitenbrouwer and Koosje Sierman<sup>(1996)</sup><sup>10</sup> wrote more than ten years ago about this lack of knowledge:

**‘There is as yet little accumulated knowledge in the field of graphic design. Scientific studies into the production and effects of typography and graphic design are virtually non-existent.’**

Today, this lack of research is still being deplored.

Hugues Boekraad<sup>(2006)</sup><sup>11</sup> states:

**‘However, this design discipline is not given the scientific attention it deserves.... Scientific research into the methods and functions of graphic design would help us understand and, if necessary, criticise, the social, symbolic and political effects of this design discipline.’**

I can assure you that this lament is a standard element in texts on graphic design. Therefore, critical publications are also unsuitable for mapping the professional field.

According to Kuitenbrouwer and Sierman<sup>(1996, p 8)</sup> the result of this lack of attention for these elements is that the practice

**‘runs the very real risk of succumbing to its own success and to be marginalised to the status of a decorative frill for mass communication.’**

In the October 2008 issue of **Print**<sup>12</sup>, Rick Poynor wrote:

**‘Their shyness about origins does seem short-sighted, though; it’s just the latest example of graphic design’s endemic lack of faith in its own worthiness.’**

These last two quotes directly link the lack of theory, research and criticism to an endemic lack of faith amongst graphic designers in their own capabilities and to a marginalisation of the profession.

What about questions?

The above quotes leave us with the impression that the professional field is presented in many different ways in published sources. The enthusiastic introductions, surveys and competitions present a sunny, positive image, whereas in critical analyses, dark clouds are gathering.

In fact, the published sources raise more questions instead of providing clear distinctions. Some examples of questions that immediately come to mind when reading the quotes above are:

What are the 'many different aspects and elements', the 'dozen different professions', or the 'professional activities' mentioned in these books?

Do the 'most influential and revered designers' present us with an image of the professional field that corresponds to the practice? Are there designers who do not fit this image? Do these designers really represent the core activities of the professional field?

On the basis of which criteria can we judge what 'the most impressive work' is?

How can one claim a 'superb cross-section' without defining what the boundaries are?

What is the importance of critical reflection?

What knowledge do we need to practice our profession?

Why is design critique so slow to develop?

Is there really so little scientific interest in the production and effects of graphic design?

What is the demonstrable role of graphic design in mass communication?

Are graphic designers really suffering from a lack of professional self-confidence because they are shy about their origins?

8 Jorge Frascara (1988) 'Graphic design: fine art or social science.' **Design issues** 5(1), pp 18-29. Also published in: V. Margolin, & R. Buchanan (1995) **The Idea of Design. A design issues reader** Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press

9 Heller, S. 2006. 'Introduction. Where's the criticism?' In: M. Bierut, W. Drenttel & S. Heller (eds). **Looking Closer five. Critical writings on graphic design**. New York: Allworth Press. (p x)

10 C. Kuitenbrouwer and K. Sierman (1996) **Over grafisch ontwerpen in Nederland: een pleidooi voor geschiedschrijving en theorievorming** [On graphic design in the Netherlands: a case for historiography and theory] Rotterdam: Uitgeverij 010 (p 8)

11 Hugues Boekraad (2006) **Mijn werk is niet mijn werk. Pierre Bernard. Ontwerpen voor het publieke domein** [My work is not my work. Pierre Bernard. Design for the public domain] Baden: Lars Müller Publishers (p 46)

12 Rick Poyner (2008) 'Critical Omissions. Design critics can only gain from accepting their own evolving history.' **Print**, Oct. 2008 (pp 33-34)

Of course, these questions are much too comprehensive and too general to answer, but it remains remarkable that the literature on graphic design even seems to avoid them.

The need for a systematic description

Still, in practice the professional field presents itself under one denominator. This at least arouses the expectation that there are some characteristics that apply to the entire profession. Which characteristics do all graphic designers have in common, then? Could those characteristics be used to define the professional field? Can they help us in making statements about what is 'common' and what are 'exceptions'?

It should at least be possible to develop a systematic description of the professional field, aimed at creating an 'overall image' of the design practice. A 'structured view' may serve as the basis for answering the questions above.

POLDER W A Vert Speerijen materi	22 14 61	POLISH AIRLINES LOT, Geb 114 kr 28-	15 53 9
De Kóvter Boomer Rijnkant 33		30 Schiphol Airport	
POLDER-v VOSSEN Meer C, Okeghenst	72 21 98	POLITEIA, Recherche en Informatie bui,	92 06 3
		Linnesthof 52	
POLDER Ir G v d Dir der Analystensch	79 87 64		
Dr F A Steensma Valeriusp 32			
POLDER Z v d, Reinwardt Loozenstetj	94 00 18		
en Verwerf, Reinwardtstr 31			
POLDERGEMALEN BRANDWAARBOURG	6 34 38		
MU ENKEL voor Zie onder Vroon NV			
H V			
POLDERMAN C J, Fil chef NV Palthe,	19 25 74		
Rengerkerkestr 16			
POLDERMAN F F, Foto-Ontw aliditk en	8 21 02		
verer camera's en access, Kinkerstr 131			
Privé, Potuilestr 73	12 27 85		
POLDERMAN G A, Arts, Pr Berniadi			
61, Dlesmen	94 86 27		
POLDERMAN G J, K Doornstr 111	16 19 39		

Staatsdrukkerij 1965

31 14 88	polak daniels, dr a,	76 49 51	poley, a j, schubertln 185
	schoonhoven 204, arts	89 56 44	polhuys-t hart, j h,
76 71 13	polak, j, schubertln 75		l de collignstr 7, leiddrp
76 59 87	polak, m, schubertln 178,		
	aardapp groent enz		politie
21 06 95	polak, malika en erie,	41 10 25	alarmnummer leiderdorp
	spoorbloem 19	12 10 25	tot 3-9-1978
15 30 94	polak-nieuwenhuyzen, m c,		bgg meldkamer der rijkspolitie
	v wyckersloothpln 3/k235,		(070) 63 89 69
	oegstgt	41 10 25	groepsbur acacialn 20 leiderdorp
76 31 54	poland, a c, de geneestetr 2/a	12 10 25	tot 3-9-1978
13 48 93	polane, l, bronkhorst 5	14 44 44	alarmnummer leiden
21 28 84	polane, l, condorhorst 122	15 54 40	alarmnummer oegstgeest
12 48 84	tot 28-10-1978		bgg meldkamer rijkspolitie
12 34 35	polane, a j, a crynsenstr 2		

design: Bram Engelse, Jolijn van de Wouw (Total Design) 1978-79

14 06 81	polderman, prof j, uhlenbeckd 4	13 29 02	poppema, l p, corantynstr 70
14 42 95	polderman, a m, wasstr 67	31 27 20	poppen, j w, stalpaerthoff 8
21 68 38	polders, m, munikenstr 75	13 33 70	poppenheim, e g,
76 16 41	polderwaard, w a, bachstr 64,		ryn en schied 121
	part verpl	21 05 79	poptie, j j, buizerdhorst 16
21 15 77	poley, a j, zylsngl 82	14 41 78	poptie woninginrichting,
			morsngl 87
	politie	76 63 44	poptie, a, opaalstr 166
14 44 44	alarmnummer	21 19 68	porcelijn, j b, papiermolen 38
14 99 61	hoofdbur (overige gesprekken)	76 96 15	porcelijn, c, schubertln 23
	zonneveldstr 10	21 96 44	portegijs, j, willemstr 32
15 50 63	politieke scholingcursus,	21 43 20	portengens-verduin, j c w,
	rynsburgerwg 28		rosmolen 214
		76 17 59	portheine, mr f, vandelin 68
		31 43 65	portier, j, leiderskd 24

design: Bram Engelse, Jolijn van de Wouw (Total Design) 1983-84

21 21 15	polderman, prof j, uhlenbeckd 4	14 06 81
22 10 13	polderman, a m, wasstr 67	14 42 95
12 48 09	polders, m, munikenstr 75	21 68 38
21 90 52	polderwaard, w a, bachstr 64, part	
21 68 82	verpl	76 16 41
13 19 05	poley, a j, zylsngl 82	21 15 77
13 43 34		
21 00 53	politie	
(01715) 22 70		
17 49 63	alarmnummer	14 44 44
21 57 06	hoofdbur (overige gesprekken)	14 99 61
72 09 80	zonneveldstr 10	
21 31 63	politieke scholingcursus,	15 50 63
89 55 35	rynsburgerwg 28	17 04 38
76 71 13	pol, a. vd. boerhaavln 319	

design: Kees Ruyter, Jolijn van de Wouw (Total Design);

numerals 1984: Gerard Unger, Chris Vermaas 1984

Museumpark 7 3015 CB	436 53 53	Polm LH Scottstrat 26
Polino GO Hoofdweg 614 3067 GK	420 13 78	Polm P Valkenburgsing
Polish Business Information Centre		Polm R Vegelinsoord 86
Beursplein 37 3011 AA	405 30 45	Polmal BV Pascalgweg 44
Politak D Begoniastraat 11/A 3051 LC	422 07 09	idem
		mobiele telefoon
		mobiele telefoon
		fax
<b>Politie</b>	06 - 11	Polman ESD Nieuwe Bi
<b>Alarmnummer</b>		Polman J H Cordell Hull
<b>Gemeentepolitie Rotterdam</b>		Polman CJ Kelloggplaa
Neckarweg 36 3197 KX BOTLEK RT	(0181) 21 34 44	Polman H E Robert Koc
idem	(0181) 21 74 44	Polman F Lariksplein 7/
idem	(0181) 26 33 65	Polman H J Malmopad
<b>Politie-Hondenvereniging De Roos</b>		Polman J J M Notenhag
Ratelaarweg 10 3053 JP	422 02 83	Polman CC Notenoot
<b>Politie Tiplijn</b>	424 10 00	

basic interior design: Martin Major, Jan-Kees Schelvis;

type design Telefon: Martin Major 1994-95

Polmer H G	514 12 74	Polm AN Vroeiweg 49 3322 UA	520
Polmer E	06 - 43 76 78 43	Polm P Criquiuslaan 136 3332 FA	531
Polmer H G	512 78 45	Polm M M Boerhaavln 52 3334 IS	545
Polmer A G	512 78 45	Polm M V Driftstraat 49/A 3335 CD	522
Polmer A G	512 78 45	Polm L M Marnixstraat 27 3335 EK	523
Polhuys I	513 86 30	Polm E Vd Marnixstraat 93 3336 EW	521
Polhuys I	513 86 30	Polm M A Heermanshof 7 3337 EK	301
Polhuys I	513 86 30	Polm G W	
Polhuys I	513 86 30	Prins Frederikstraat 5 3338 CH	522
Polhuys I	513 86 30	Polm H G Schubertlaan 126 3339 EA	532
Polhuys I	513 86 30	Pol-en Snookercentrum Big	
Polhuys I	513 86 30	Break Ievendal 152 3331 JP	514
Polhuys I	513 86 30	Polhalkhalij H	
Polhuys I	513 86 30	Alexandrine Tinnenplein 12 3331 PW	532
Polhuys I	513 86 30	Polm RJ	
Polhuys I	513 86 30	Huizen van Woerdenstraat 17 3332 PF	572
Polhuys I	513 86 30	mobiele telefoon	06 - 24 62
Polhuys I	513 86 30	Port van Leyden Café	

basic interior design: Martin Major, Jan-Kees Schelvis;

type design Telefon: Martin Major 2003-04

Figure 4

Interior telephone directories from 1965 to the present. With the interior the emphasis is almost exclusively on visual orientation. Despite the only small differences in content a number of visual variations present themselves. The users of the directory hold very strong opinions about these variations and changes are immediately noted.

Source: collection of Fred Rijlaarsdam, Leiden

U.K.

# Farnilon® SR 120 mg

60

Bevat per tablet met gereguleerde afgifte 120 mg verapamilhydrochloride. Kleurstof: titaandioxide (E171).

60 tabletten met gereguleerde afgifte

HAFNER

# HAFNER

Farnilon® SR 120 mg 60 tabletten met gereguleerde afgifte

Bevat per tablet met gereguleerde afgifte 120 mg verapamilhydrochloride. Kleurstof: titaandioxide (E171).

U.K.

# VeraPamil HydroChloride

120 mg per tablet 60 tabletten met gereguleerde afgifte

Kleurstof: Titaandioxide (E171)

Merksamen: Farnilon SR®

Productent: Hafner

U.K.

Figure 5  
Design for the front of packaging for prescription drugs. The four core functions are illustrated by these design variations:

- representation of the product (Farnilon)
- identity (Hafner)
- orientation (sequence of text elements)
- context (within the tradition and legal framework of packaging for prescription drugs)

# 1 Research into the visual practice: commercial activities

Methods. The practice

For starters, let us try to survey commercial practice. Perhaps the easiest way to arrive at an answer to the question of what graphic design entails, is to ask graphic designers what it is they actually do.

13 Paul Nini (1996) 'What graphic designers say they do.' *Information Design Journal* 8(2), pp 181-188

14 Kate Ann LaMere (2008) 'Authorities/ Knowledge/Beliefs/ Outcomes: "Governing" in the profession of Graphic Design in the US'. *Proceedings of DRS2008, Design Research Society Biennial Conference, Sheffield, UK. 16-19 July 2008*

15 R. Gill (2008) *Technobohemians or the new Cybertariat? New media work in Amsterdam a decade after the Web*, Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures.

16 Some spontaneous responses to this choice were: 'this will probably include a lot of people who would have had no training whatsoever', or 'this will include many one-person businesses', or 'they probably operate from their bedrooms or attics' and 'Why would you want to study that? It is quite obvious what rubbish is being produced'.

In spite of its seeming simplicity, this research method is seldom applied in our field. In 1996, Paul Nini conducted a similar study, asking 1500 graphic designers about their activities.<sup>13</sup>

Kate Ann LaMere<sup>(2008)</sup><sup>14</sup> looked at the characteristics of graphic design in the United States in relation to education and to design awards.

Of course, there are many studies that describe practices.

In the Netherlands, for example, a similar study was conducted by Rosalind Gill<sup>(2008)</sup><sup>15</sup>. She studied the position of 'new media designers' in Amsterdam, specifically with regard to their working situation. However, there are very few studies that specifically analyse the practice of graphic design.

In fact, we are concerned here with the first exploration ('scoping') of a design project. We have to determine who the players are, what their motives and expectations are, and how they function now. We have to determine the framework, the horizon and the positions. Initially, this research will be small-scale and exploratory. On the basis of the results, we can take further steps.

Which graphic designers should we interview?

Now for the second question: Which designers are suitable for interviewing? Should we interview the top designers, the award winners, the owners of large design firms, or the critics?

Or is it advisable to interview young graphic designers who have just taken their first steps in practice and are now building the future of the profession? Or should we speak to the professional associations?

As researchers, we must first establish a few boundaries ourselves. After all, even an exploratory study can't just take off in all directions and therefore it needs boundaries. We have chosen to impose upon ourselves two quite pragmatic limitations:

Limitation 1

A graphic designer is anyone who calls him or herself a graphic designer

'Graphic designer' is not a legally protected profession, so anyone may call themselves a graphic designer. However, when someone claims to be a graphic designer, he or she will probably have clients and therefore also have results to show.<sup>16</sup>



## Limitation 2

We have restricted ourselves geographically to the city limits of Breda

The city of Breda was chosen because the St. Joost Academy is located there and because we expected to find a sufficiently large population to study.

We excluded the suburbs of Bavel, Teteringen, Prinsenbeek and Ulvenhout from the study. With these two limitations established, we drew up a list of firms while leaving open the option to abandon or adapt the limitations at a later stage.

It may be concluded from the responses that strong opinions (if not prejudices) are held within the profession about the relationship between, on the one hand, having a reputation and fame and being established in one of the big cities and, on the other hand, being a good graphic designer. We, however, adhered to another premise: all printed matter and websites are the result of graphic design.<sup>17</sup>

Before we could ask graphic designers what exactly it is that they do, information about how to contact them had to be gathered. Based on their numbers and location, we could then make a selection among the designers. The inventory undertaken in Breda yielded the following results.

### Number of designers

A search on the Internet resulted in the names and addresses of no less than 227 firms who advertise themselves as 'graphic designers' in Breda. These are firms that have 'graphic design' as their main activity. Firms that listed 'graphic design' only as a secondary activity were not counted, but we did include them in our inventory. A number of photographers, illustrators, copywriters, website designers, advertising agencies and communications consultancy agencies indicated that they also provide graphic designs.

We approached all 227 firms by mail at the end of February 2008. We first sent them a letter, following it up with several reminders by e-mail. By the end of March 2008, we had a list of exactly 100 verified addresses. The list has been included in the **Grafische Almanak Breda**.<sup>18</sup> In the course of 2008, we added another 70 design firms, which for various reasons had not responded to our first endeavours.

These figures pretty much correspond to the results of a similar inventory of the entire creative sector in the province of Gelderland taken by the Design Platform Arnhem. In 2005, Arnhem had 134 graphic design firms<sup>(O-P-A, 2005)</sup> <sup>19</sup>. Arnhem has a population of around 142,500 and is comparable in size to Breda, excluding the above suburbs.

Existing systems of classification for businesses, and the number of professionals deduced from those systems, seemed to be of little use for the field of graphic design.

17 The study was conducted in collaboration with Maurits Vroombout and Bart Eerden. The first version of this article appeared in the *Graphic Almanac Breda*, published in June 2008 on the occasion of the opening of Graphics Museum De Beyerd. A second version was presented at the NewViews2-Conference in London in July 2008.

18 R. van Hoesel, K. van der Waarde (ed.) (2008). **Grafische Almanak Breda, een onderzoek naar grafisch ontwerpers in Breda** [Graphic Almanac Breda] Breda: AKV | St. Joost, Avans Hogeschool.

19 O-P-A. 2005. **The creative map of Arnhem and Gelderland**. Arnhem <http://www.o-p-a.nl/cms/content/view/1492/42/> (correct on 07-02-09)

The **Standard Business Index** (SBI), which is based on classifications of the European Union and the United Nations, does not even mention graphic design.<sup>20</sup> As a result, it is sometimes categorised under professions that in practice have little or nothing to do with graphic design.

In the **Central Bureau of Statistics** (CBS) report '*Artists in the Netherlands*', (by Jenje and Ter Haar, 2007)<sup>21</sup> the authors distinguish between 'graphic designer (secondary)' and 'graphic designer (higher)'. The first are in the same group with 'book illustrators, quick-draw artists, set designers and secondary commercial designers'. The higher graphic designers are classified in the same group as 'museum employees for presentations, fashion designers and higher set designers, higher commercial designers'. The number of graphic designers within these groups is unknown.

In the **Chamber of Commerce Business Classification** (BIK coding) graphic design was combined with illustration firms, but separate from web design. After a change in the law in 2008, this classification was replaced with the SBI.

20 The Standard Business Index (SBI) is based on the classification of the European Union (Nomenclature statistique des activités économiques dans la Communauté Européenne, NACE) and on that of the United Nations (International Standards Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities, ISIC). This classification has been revised in 2008, but 'graphic design' is still missing.

21 W. Jenje & D. ter Haar (2007) **Kunstenaars in Nederland** (Centrum voor beleidsstatistiek 07005). Voorburg/Heerlen: Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS) [Artists in the Netherlands (Centre for Policy Statistics 07005). Voorburg/Heerlen: Central Bureau of Statistics.]

22 Breda – An information system of the department of Research and Information, Breda. <http://breda.buurtmonitor.nl>

Our first inventory shows that, on average, graphic design firms employ three persons. There are also graphic designers employed by other companies who are active in the field of 'visual communications'. This group probably consists mainly of website designers and designers working for advertising agencies, but printing houses and communications departments of larger companies also employ graphic designers. We estimate that in Breda some 700 people make their living by being professionally active in graphic design. Breda (not including the suburbs mentioned earlier) has some 140,000 inhabitants.<sup>22</sup> This would mean that one out of every 200 inhabitants is a 'graphic designer'.

However, these figures must be used with caution. As long as there is no exact definition of what 'graphic design' is, this number may change considerably.

## Location

Graphic designers are not exclusively located in city centres. Figure 6 shows the location of 100 graphic design firms in Breda.



Figure 6

The locations of one hundred graphic design firms in Breda. Our initial inventory shows:

- on average, a little over 3 people work in a graphic design firm
- many graphic designers work as employees for other firms in the field of 'visual communications': for website design firms and advertising agencies, but also for printers, publishers and the communication departments of larger companies.
- we estimate that in Breda some 700 people earn their living in graphic design: 1 out of 200.

Illustration: Yurr Rozenberg, 2008

It is obvious that graphic design studios are not dependent on the ‘city centre’ or a ‘business park’. The location of the Blushuis, specifically set up as a ‘creative hotspot’, is easily recognisable on the map of Figure 6, because several graphic design firms are located here in the same building, northwest of the city centre.

Activities

We asked all firms the following three questions:

- What activities do you engage in as a graphic designer?
- How do you judge the quality of a design?
- What phases do you divide a design project into?

We also interviewed a dozen firms specifically about their activities. They mentioned 27 activities spontaneously. These are shown in Figure 7.

Diversity of activities

All design firms combine several activities. The publications on graphic design that I mentioned in the introduction all signalled this diversity, without saying what it included. The present study goes a little further by describing this diversity. Most of these activities may also be practised as specialised activities.

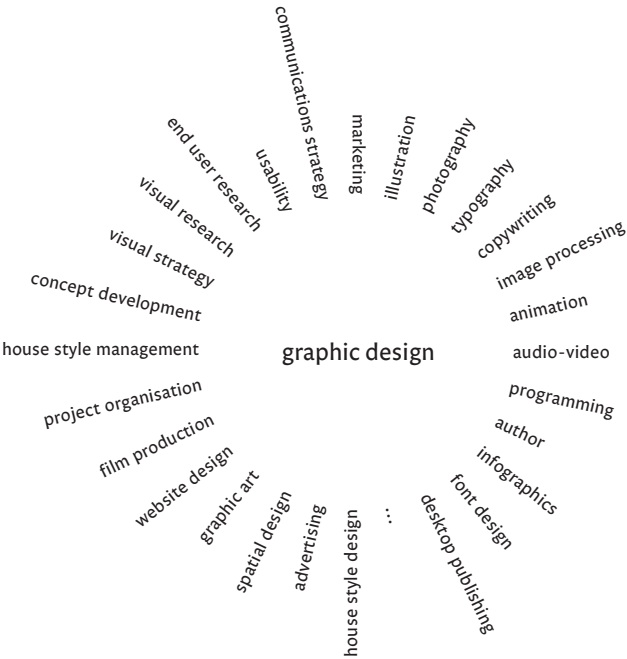


Figure 7  
Graphic design consists of one activity or a combination of activities. The diagram lists the terms used by graphic designers in the survey.



However, it is as yet unclear what all these activities have in common. They are all – in one way or another – related to graphic design, but this relationship is not yet clear. Part 2 will examine this in more detail.

#### Unique combinations

An initial analysis shows that there is no single combination of activities that is characteristic of the industry. Practically every firm offers a unique mix of activities. The designer's personality – his or her character, training, skills and interests – determines the choice of specific activities.

Once again, we must be cautious. Our inventory lists the terms used by the respondents themselves. We do not know exactly what these activities entail, and it is quite possible that not all terms mean the same thing to everyone. Words like 'advertising' and 'marketing'; 'audiovisual', 'film production' and 'animation' may vary in meaning. This will require further study.

#### The relationship with the client: personal, long-term

The personal relationship a graphic designer has with a client is very important. There has to be a 'click' between them, which will occur if a client is compatible with the designer's personality. In such cases, contacts between designers and clients may be sustained, sometimes over long periods of time. Phrases like 'fit together' and 'shared growth' were often uttered. Designers may still render various services to different clients. Several designers stated that 'my clients are often not aware of the fact that I do other activities as well'.

#### Location of clients: sometimes local, often national

One of the assumptions was that 'designers in Breda would probably work for clients in Breda'. This turned out to be only partially true. Breda designers work for clients throughout the Netherlands and often for clients abroad as well. Curiously enough, graphic designers in Breda have very few commercial contacts with Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, even though this neighbouring country is only 35 km away.

#### Design methods, phasing, terminology

Graphic designers vary greatly in their methods, phasing and terminology. They do not use a 'single design process', but choose from a large number of different possibilities, focusing on 'delivering what the client needs' rather than following a 'standard step-by-step procedure'. They 'think along' with the client about various options, and choices are made together. We did not find a standard in phasing or terminology, either. This phenomenon deserves more specific attention.

## Criteria for evaluation

Many graphic designers found it difficult to say which criteria a design should meet. First of all, the designer himself has to be satisfied with the result. The client, too, must approve the proposals and the results, and appreciate them. A successful and, above all pleasant, collaboration with the client is highly appreciated by designers and is in effect used as a criterion for success. On the one hand, collaboration that leads to a good result indicates that the client has chosen the right graphic designer, while on the other hand the result shows that the input of the graphic designer has been appreciated.

Besides using these primary criteria for evaluation, designers sometimes gauge the response of the ultimate beholders, but only very few designers do this. The real effects of the design in terms of the goals of the client are seldom measured. Some designers mention the importance of peer appreciation in the form of awards and publications, but again, this is a small group. This fact seems to be at odds with the huge number of awards and yearbooks, and should be studied further.

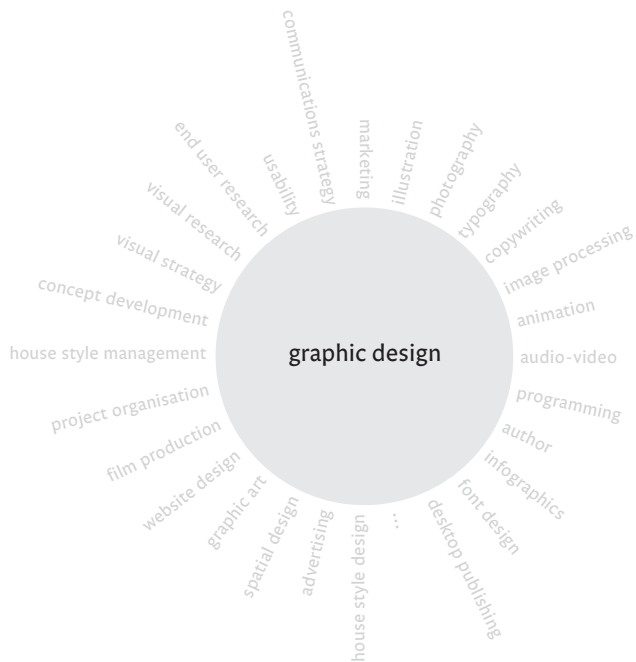


Figure 8

These three questions – of the desired effects, visual goal and visual elements of a design – are always considered simultaneously. They concern three interdependent processes that are applied in alternating order and with varying importance. Together they probably constitute the core activities of the profession.

## 2 Graphic design: developing visual means

People interpret visual information for various reasons. Some examples are information (dictionaries, signposting), education (textbooks, manuals), staying up-to-date (newspapers, websites), entertainment (novels, magazines) or necessity (tax forms, informative leaflets). It is difficult to think of a phrase that represents all these activities in one word, which has to variously include ‘the reader of texts’, ‘the viewer of illustrations, photographs and images’, ‘the consumer’, the ‘web surfer’, the ‘software user’, the ‘citizen’, the ‘student’, and any other role in which an individual interprets visual information. The word ‘receiver’ was rejected, because it has a passive connotation, whereas paying attention to something and interpreting it are conscious decisions. Despite its somewhat old-fashioned undertone, the word ‘beholder’ seems to most accurately describe someone who is actively interpreting visual information.

Graphic designers are involved in the development of visual products that are interpreted by beholders. In most cases, graphic designers work on commission.

Clients, too, may have various motives for producing information. Some examples of this include reinforcing the visual recognisability of their identity (logos, websites), approaching potential contacts (brochures, packaging), guiding passengers (signposting, floor plans) and streamlining administrative procedures (forms). These motives are directly related to the goals of organisations, businesses and institutions.

The motivations of beholders and clients often differ. Still, the goal is to design a visual product that both meets the expectations of the client and helps the beholder in interpreting the information. The interviews show that graphic designers accomplish this by asking themselves three questions with each commission:

**What are the client’s goals and how do beholders benefit? In other words, what are the design’s desired effects?**

**Which visual strategy is most likely to achieve the visual aim?**

**What visual elements are available?**

These three questions are always considered simultaneously. They concern three interdependent processes that are applied in alternating order and with varying importance. Together, they probably constitute the core activities of the profession – what all graphic designers seem to have in common.

When describing these processes, they can only be discussed sequentially. In the following pages I will first describe the ‘visual elements’, then the ‘visual strategy’, to conclude with the ‘effects’.

There are several ways to describe the smallest parts – the elements – of a visual presentation of information. Graphic designers often use the phrase ‘text, image and colour’. What do graphic designers exactly do with ‘text, image and colour’? The interviews show that graphic designers use these visual elements in two activities.

## Activity 1

### Selecting the visual elements

There are four types of elements:

#### The visual form of text

This is the domain of typography. The content and structure of the supplied text have to be represented visually. The different functions of text elements such as titles, paragraphs, captions, footnotes and quotations have to be visually represented in such a way that they can be distinguished from each other.

#### Image

Examples of this are illustrations, icons and photographs. The term ‘image’ has many definitions.

#### Schematic elements

These are elements that do not belong to the first two groups, e.g. colour surfaces, lines, backgrounds and decorative elements.

#### Integrated combinations

These are elements in which text and image are fully integrated in the sense that their meaning is lost when the two are separated. Examples of this are floor plans, diagrams, certain logos and infographics.

The first activity is selecting the form of the elements from the available material. In most cases, the client provides graphic designers with text and images. If these are not sufficient, graphic designers will create new elements. In consultation with the client, the text may be altered or other images may be chosen.

Graphic designers can create new elements by engaging the services of photographers and illustrators, by making their own photograph restorations, or by using stock images. They may even design a font specifically for one client.

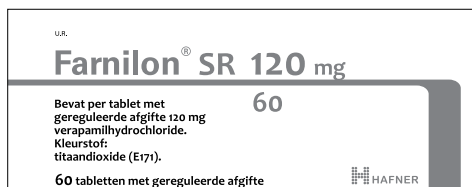


Figure 9

Examples of visual elements found on the packaging of prescription drugs. This design consists of text elements, schematic elements and two integrated combinations (the ® and the logo). There are no image elements.

Some descriptions of the various visual elements can be found in the literature on design. Examples are the models described by Jacques Bertin <sup>(1967, 1977)</sup> 23, Michael Twyman <sup>(1979)</sup> 24, Barbara Tversky <sup>(1995, 2001)</sup> 25 and Bob Horn <sup>(1998)</sup> 26. In his thesis, Yuri Engelhardt <sup>(2002)</sup> 27 has compared a large number of these models. In fact, they can all be used to look at visual elements in a certain way.

23 Jacques Bertin (1967) **Sémiologie graphique** Paris: Editions Gauthier-Villars. English translation by W.J. Berg (1983): **Semiology of Graphics** Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, and Jacques Bertin 1977. **La graphique et le traitement graphique de l'information**. Paris: Flammarion. English translation by W.J. Berg and P. Scott (1981): **Graphics and Graphic Information Processing** Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co.

24 Michael Twyman (1979) 'A schema for the study of graphic language.' in: P.A. Kolers, M.E. Wrolstad, H. Bouma (eds): **Processing of visible language** Volume 1. pp 117-150. New York: Plenum Press.

25 Barbara Tversky (1995) 'Cognitive origins of graphic conventions.' in: F.T. Marchese (ed): **Understanding images** pp 29-53. New York: Springer Verlag, and Barbara Tversky (2001) 'Spatial schemas in depictions.' in: M. Gattis (ed): **Spatial schemas and abstract thought** pp 79-111. Cambridge: MIT Press

26 Bob Horn (1998) **Visual Language: Global Communication for the 21st Century** Bainbridge Island, WA: MacroVU, Inc.

27 Yuri Engelhardt (2002) **The Language of Graphics. A framework for the analysis of syntax and meaning in maps, charts and diagrams** Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, ILLC 2002-03

28 Jean-luc Doumont (2009) **Trees, maps, and theorems. Effective communication for rational minds** Kraainem: Principiae.

29 James Hartley (1994) **Designing Instructional Text** (3rd edition) London: Kogan Page.

30 M.W. Dobson (1979) 'Visual information processing during cartographic communication.' **The Cartographic Journal** 16. pp 14-20.

31 D.L. Medin, R.L. Goldstone & D. Gentner (1993) 'Respects for similarity.' **Psychological Review** 100 pp 254-278.

32 W. Winn (1993) 'Perception Principles.' pp 55-126 in: M. Fleming and W.H. Levie (eds): **Instructional message design, principles from the behavioral and cognitive sciences** Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications.

Activity 2  
Determining the **relationships between the elements**

The second activity is that the graphic designer places the visual elements in relation to each other. These relationships between the elements are somewhat similar to the 'Gestalt principles' in psychology.

- Proximity**  
The distance between elements reflects their relationship. Elements that are far away from each other are less interrelated than elements placed close together.
- Prominence**  
The more prominent an element is, the more important it is to the reader or the client.
- Similarity**  
Elements that are similar have the same function. The greater the similarity, the more their functions are the same.
- Sequence**  
The sequence of the elements indicates the way the information is ordered.

The various ways in which these four elements may be combined offer many possibilities for structuring information graphically. A conscious and consistent application of these relationships results in visual structures that beholders can interpret.

The four relationships are also mentioned in the literature on graphic design. Jean-luc Dumont <sup>(2009)</sup> 28, for instance, describes the manifestation of these four relationships in the layout of a page. The function of proximity is described by Hartley <sup>(1994)</sup> 29, that of prominence by Dobson <sup>(1979)</sup> 30, similarity by Medin <sup>(1993)</sup> 31 and sequence by Winn <sup>(1993)</sup> 32.

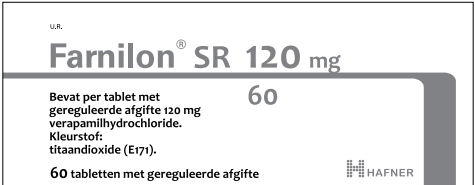


Figure 10  
Proximity, prominence, (dis)similarity and sequence are applied in every visual ordering of elements. Examples of related visual elements found on the same packaging of prescription drugs.

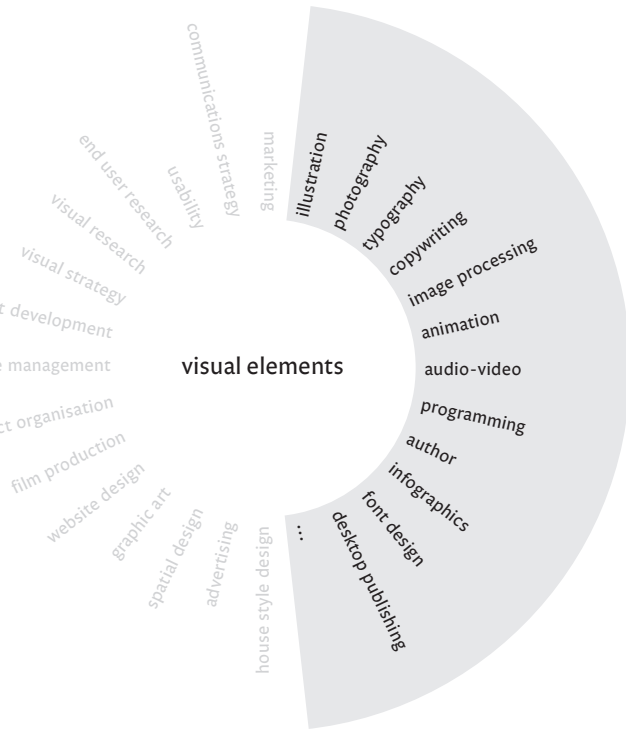


Figure 11  
Sub-activities of graphic designers that are directly related to selecting and combining visual elements.

Figure 11 shows these activities in the activity circle. They are directly related to selecting and combining visual elements.

Although both activities – selecting elements and determining their relationship – produce a visible result, the motivation for a specific choice of visual elements is lacking. In order to judge whether a choice and combination are suitable, the first two questions must also be answered:

**What are the goals of clients and beholders? In other words, what are the design's desired effects?**

**Which visual strategy is most likely to achieve the visual aim?**

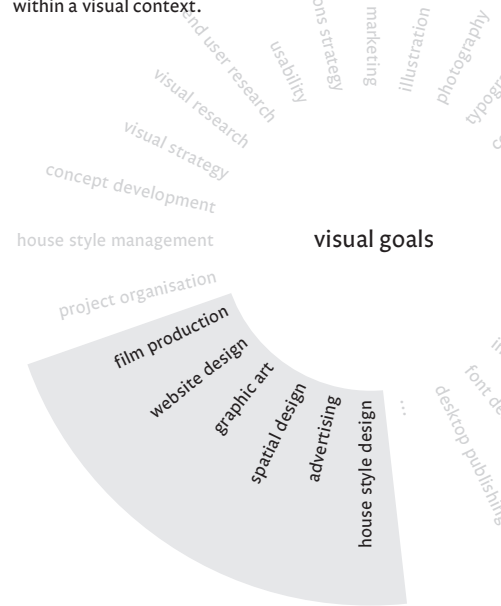
*With each commission, graphic designers consider the four core functions to reach a visual goal*

The third question concerns the elements that are used to make a design.  
The second question concerns the function of the design:

**What should the chosen visual elements accomplish? What is the visual goal?**

The practical answer given by many graphic designers to the question of what they aim to achieve with these visual elements is that they refer to a genre. The interviewed designers mentioned examples such as websites, spatial designs, advertising, house styles, graphic art and audiovisual productions. Figure 12 shows these activities.

Figure 12  
The activities of designers mentioned by themselves in the study. In practice, every design turns out to be a configuration for interrelated functions: visual identity, visual orientation and visual representation within a visual context.



These are rather divergent genres. If graphic designers concern themselves with all of them, this is very likely based on a common role. There have to be a number of characteristic functions performed by graphic designers if they are to design for all these different visual genres.

The professional literature often mentions combinations of a number of different functions.

Richard Hollis (1994)<sup>33</sup> describes three functions. He claims that

**identification,**  
**information design** and  
**presentation & promotion**

have not changed for centuries. Identification discloses what something is, or where it comes from.

Information design shows the relationships between things in direction, position and scale. Presentation and promotion serves to draw attention and commit the information to memory.

Clive Ashwin (1998)<sup>34</sup> describes six communicative functions of design results:

**referential** (objective representation)  
**emotive** (subjective presentation )  
**conative** (persuasive )  
**poetic/aesthetic** (beautiful)  
**meta-linguistic** (explanation of other information)  
**phatic** (the catalyst function that initiates, maintains and ends communication)

Jorge Frascara (2004)<sup>35</sup> distinguishes:

designs **to inform**  
designs **to persuade**  
designs **for education**  
designs **for administration**

Malcolm Barnard (2005)<sup>36</sup> describes four functions:

**informative**  
**persuasive**  
**decorative**  
**magic**

For the Visual Rhetoric Research Group (Holslag, 2006)<sup>37</sup>

Hugues Boekraad once introduced four basic functions:

**identity**  
**representation**  
**orientation**  
**system representation**

This classification corresponds to a large degree with that by Richard Hollis. The more books one reads, the more functions one is likely to encounter. How many of them do we actually see in actual practice?

Again, the easiest solution is to ask the graphic designers. Do they recognise these functions? As a starting point, we used those mentioned by Richard Hollis and Hugues Boekraad. If the graphic designers we interviewed did not recognise them, we would have to look for alternatives.

33 Richard Hollis (1994)  
**Graphic Design. A Concise History** London: Thames and Hudson, p 10.

34 Clive Ashwin (1989)  
'Drawing, Design and Semiotics.' pp 199-209 in: V. Margolin. **Design Discourse. History – Theory – Criticism** Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

35 Jorge Frascara (2004)  
**Communication Design. Principles, Methods and Practice** New York: Allworth Press.

36 Malcolm Barnard (2005)  
**Graphic Design as Communication** Abingdon: Routledge, pp 14-15.

37 Rens Holslag (2006) 'The research group Visual Rhetoric. Interim-report'. In Karel van der Waarde (ed): **Visuele Retorica. Een periodeverslag** [Visual Rhetoric. Interim-report]. Breda: AKV|St. Joost.

We asked five designers to choose one recent project and discuss this with us in detail. The projects were packaging for garden pumps, catalogues for laboratory supplies, a house style for a comprehensive school, a menu for a theatre and an annual report of an organisation. With all of these commissions, the designers had indeed applied the four functions, but they **did not regard them as separate functions**. Also, they used quite different words for them.

I suspect that the core activity of graphic design does indeed consist of simultaneously taking into account the four functions that must be balanced with each other for every commission.

These four simultaneously considered functions are:

### 1. Visual Identity

The visual identity shows the **source of a message**; it indicates where the information comes from and shows the client in so far and how they wish to present themselves. The desired future identity may differ from the current real identity. Both situations need to be discussed, and they provide the basis for the visual identity presented by the graphic designer in his or her design. The possibilities here are limited: the visual identity cannot present an absolutely incorrect image of the source, and likewise the client will reject the image if they no longer recognise themselves in it.

### 2. Visual Representation

The visual representation shows the **contents of a message**. The themes, ideas, data or structures are visually represented in full, correctly and clearly. The designer may emphasise certain elements, stress specific structures more than other possibilities and show similarities between elements. The boundaries of the visual representation are reached when the presentation no longer represents the content fully, correctly and clearly. For instance, when a book cover gives a totally different impression of its contents than what the reader experiences, when a poster does not correspond to the performance or when a graph distorts the data.

### 3. Visual Orientation

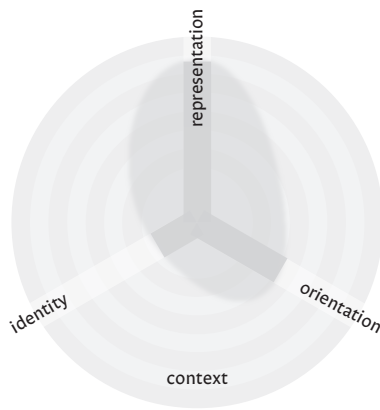
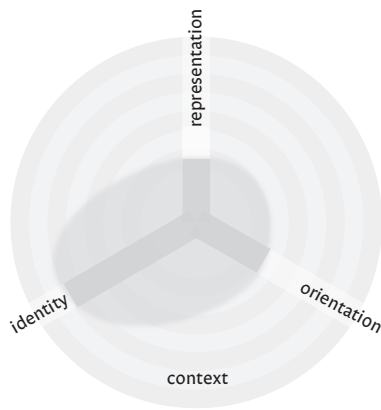
Visual orientation helps beholders in **finding their way**. Beholders choose what they wish to look at and what to give their attention to. Then they look for clues to proceed. The function of orientation is essential here in making it easy for the beholder to interpret the information correctly. The boundaries of visual orientation are mainly functional. Successful visual orientation saves time for the beholder and reduces the chance of costly or irreparable mistakes.

### 4. Visual Context

The visual context positions the **client and the beholder in a specific environment**. This includes influences like 'historic development', 'language', 'conventions', 'genre' and 'social acceptance'.

One possible configuration of these four functions is shown in Figures 13 and 14. At this point in time, we think this is correct.





Figures 13 and 14

The four core functions of graphic design. In each commission, these four visual functions must be balanced. The figure shows that 'within a context' it is possible to take up a position that emphasises either 'visual identity', 'visual representation' or 'visual orientation'. In practice, designers make these judgements implicitly and simultaneously, i.e. not step-by-step.

### Pushing the envelope, adapting content

The personality of the designer also plays a role in this integrated consideration of the four functions. Based on their own knowledge, opinions and experience, many designers will try to push the envelope of possibilities within a commission.

Also, some designers can and will contribute to the content. While thinking about the possibilities for the visual presentation, they often come up with ideas to change the content, enhancing it even further.

How much freedom in design and editorial influence the designer has, depends strongly on the commission, the client and the situation.

Once a graphic designer has balanced the four core functions and has made a first draft of the design, the result will first be evaluated from two perspectives, that of the **client** and that of the beholder.

When a designer evaluates a design, he will try to answer the following questions for the **client**:

Does the design correctly represent the client's identity?

(Does it conform to the existing house style and/or corporate identity; does it add anything?  
To what degree does it represent the current reality or the desired future reality?)

Is the content correctly represented by the design? Do all elements have the right emphasis?  
(Is the emphasis chosen in such a way that it corresponds to the effects to be obtained?)

Are the beholders directed to the locations that are most relevant to the client?

Has the design been placed within the right context? Does it fit in the historical development?  
Is it compatible with other designs aimed at the same target group?

Considering the relationship between the four core functions is a **strategic activity**. All four may be chosen in such a way that the design triggers a response in both client and beholder.

When evaluating a design, a designer will attempt to answer the following questions for the target group of **beholders**:

Is the identity recognisable? Is it clear to the beholder who the client (sender) is?

Is the content clear and intelligible?

Is information available?

Has the design been placed in the right context? Does it fit within accepted conventions?

Is it compatible with – or does it in an interesting way transcend – other designs aimed at the same target group? (These questions about the context are identical, but they are posed here from a different perspective.)

The design can never be fully evaluated by the designer himself. There will always be a few questions left that he will only be able to answer in consultation with the client and the beholder. Even though the final goals of the client and the beholder usually will lie outside the visual domain, these can have consequences for their evaluation of the visual design. This is related to the third question, that of the precise effects the visual design should accomplish. Both clients and beholders may comment on these effects without linking them to specific elements of the visual design.

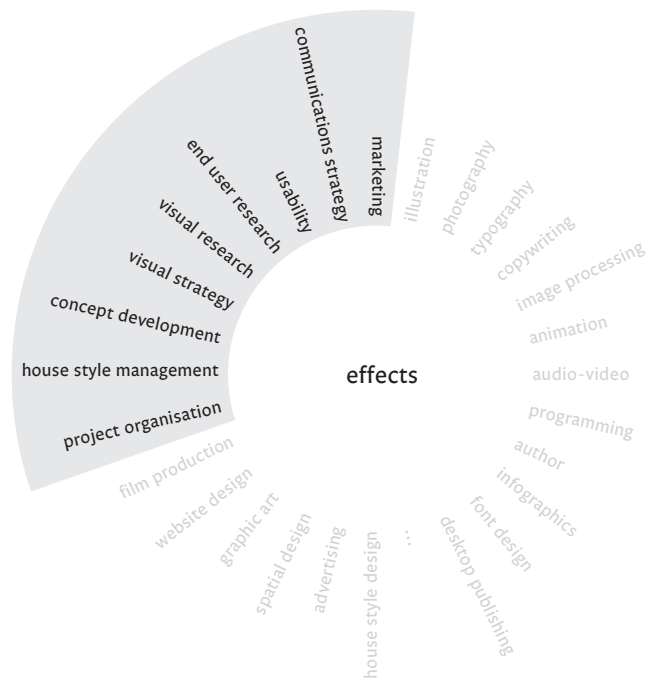


Figure 15  
Activities of graphic designers that are related to the two processes  
of collaboration and interpretation.

# Graphic designers consider the effects for clients and beholders

Answering the first two questions...

Which visual strategy seems most suitable?

Which visual elements are needed?

is not sufficient. The third question needs to be posed, too:

What are the goals of clients and beholders? In other words, which effects need to be achieved?

Two processes: collaboration and interpretation

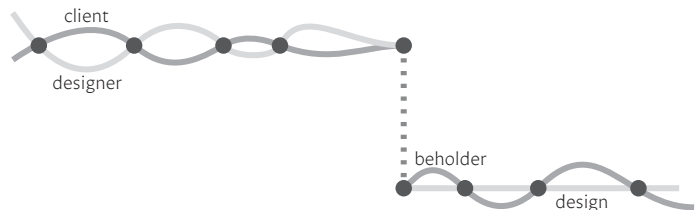
Graphic designers are involved in two processes. The first process is that in which the **designer** speaks with the **client**. This discussion should lay the foundation for the designer to develop a visual proposal that meets client's expectations. Neither the client nor the designer can arrive at such a proposal on their own: collaboration is essential.

The second process is that **between the beholder and the designed product**. Every interpretation changes the knowledge and experience of the beholder. These changes would not occur but for the design.

These processes are separated in time and place. The beholder is likely to interpret the information at a later moment in time and at a different geographical location. Applying both these processes to graphic design is part of a long tradition in which the relationships between clients, designers, products and end-users are visualised (Crilly, Maier & Clarkson, 2008) 38. (Figure 16)

The majority of graphic designers start by combining these two processes, which both have to be prepared and executed as well as can be. The activities shown in Figure 15 are all related to these two processes.

Figure 16  
Graphic designers are involved in two processes:  
• between designer and client  
• between beholder and visual information  
At left: the design evolves by collaboration between client and designer.  
At right: the beholder's interpretation of the realized design.



However, there are graphic designers who work on projects which have not been commissioned and there are projects which have few or no beholders at all, but it is as yet unknown whether these are exceptions or whether such designs belong to the core activities of the profession.

a

### The collaboration process: clients and designers

The relationship between client and designer is asymmetrical and varies with each project. Each contact between a client and a designer results in new insights that lead to a visual presentation that is effective and attractive to both.

In most cases, a client's ultimate goal cannot be reached by graphic design alone. Examples of such goals are 'more brand awareness', 'more business', 'less call-centre activity', 'lower costs' or 'higher profits'. Designers can only support such goals by facilitating the contact between clients and their customers through their designs. Graphic designers support these contacts by choosing the most suitable visual form, basing their decision on their personal relationship with the client.

Many of the graphic designers we interviewed regard a pleasant personal relationship between designer and client as an absolute must. Although in principle it is possible to work for a client with whom there is no 'personal click', designers tend to avoid this situation in practice. On-time delivery, keeping to the agreed-upon budget, and a pleasant collaboration are seen as important. The actual number of meetings differs according to circumstances (sensitivity, size and complexity of the commission, the budget, time pressure, etc.).

b

### The interpretation process: the beholders and the design

As soon as a beholder looks at a design, new insights are formed. The number of contacts between the beholder and the designed information varies: it can be one furtive glance or a long and repeated study. Relevant questions here are: Should I look at this? Of what use is this to me? Can I look at this later? Should I keep this? How do I find this again? With each contact, the beholder decides anew whether it is useful to pay attention to a design.

The combination of the three questions about the effects, visual goals and visual elements describes the essence of the professional field of graphic design. This very combination is the hallmark which all graphic designers seem to have in common.

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Figure 17

In cooperation with a client, and after consultation with beholders (pharmacists and patients), information can be modified in such a way that it better suits expectations and desires. This modified version does – unfortunately – not comply with current legal requirements.

### 3 The status of the exploration: the first step in development

Parts 1 and 2 together constitute a first step in the description of a professional practice, the 'first observation' of a practice. Figure 18 shows an overview of all phases in the design process. David Sless (2008)<sup>39</sup> describes these phases.

<sup>39</sup> David Sless (2008)  
Information Design Journal 16(3).

This model consists of seven steps:

1

#### **Exploration** (*scoping*)

This step outlines the interested parties, the desired effects and the activities required. This description also shows a number of situations that require more attention.

2

#### **Establishing** (*benchmarking*)

In this step, the activities must be aimed at defining a specific situation through measurements, scores and behavioural indicators. These data are required later to determine whether a change is an improvement or not.

3

#### **Concept development** (*prototyping*)

Based on the exploration, the benchmarking and discussions with interested parties, the designer can develop prototypes.

4

#### **Testing prototypes in practice** (*testing*)

The results from these tests are compared with the results from step 2.

5

#### **Detailing** (*refining*)

On the basis of the test results, the designer can further optimise the prototype. Depending upon the importance of the designed product, steps 3, 4, and 5 may be repeated several or many times.

6

#### **Introduction** (*implementing*)

The prototype is cautiously introduced in practice, optionally via pilot studies.

7

#### **Observation** (*monitoring*)

Once the product is designed and produced, its actual usage must be observed in practice to ascertain that the desired effects are achieved.

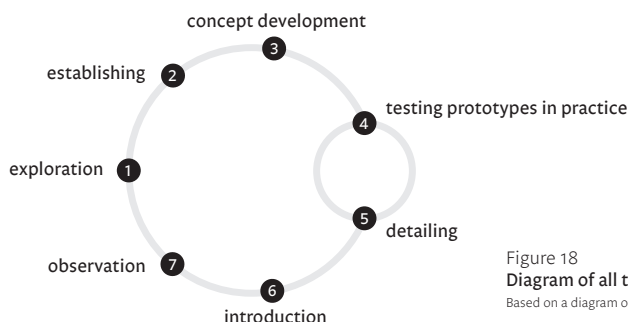


Figure 18  
Diagram of all the phases in a design process.  
Based on a diagram of David Sless, CRI, Melbourne.

Up to this point, the Visual Rhetoric Research Group's investigation into graphic design in Breda still fits within the first step of the above model. We need to define the activities of designers more precisely in order to make clear what exactly they refer to in practice. We must also determine whether the tripartite model of 'effects, visual goals and visual elements' adequately describes the practice and on which points practice differs from the model. First, we must evaluate the value of the descriptions.

Before we can start developing, we must first determine what the major problems are. Then we can define the overall situation and choose specific criteria to quantify and qualify it. This is the second step: benchmarking.

## 4 A structured description of the professional field

We have found that the field of graphic design is difficult to describe. In the literature on the subject, the various fields of application, elements and services are mentioned in every conceivable order and combination; to some, the diversity of the profession defies any description.

Our contacts with graphic designers in Breda yielded a somewhat different picture. By labelling activities and dividing them into three groups, it became clearer what the core activities and boundaries of the professional field are.

A brief description of the professional field would be:

**Graphic design is a commercial service that develops visual means to support the relationship between clients and their contacts.**

**In their designs, graphic designers accomplish this by balancing the desired effects, the visual goals and the visual elements and developing them coherently.**

The most important outcome of our exploration probably is this tripartite model of the activities:

- supporting the contacts between clients and their relations (the effects of the visual product);
- balancing and developing the four core functions together (the visual strategy);
- developing and combining visual elements (the visual elements).

It should be noted that this tripartite model is completely independent of the media that the designer uses and of the media the design is intended for. The actual results of graphic design as defined in the introduction – printed matter, digital designs and three-dimensional designs – are not reflected in this description.

By looking at these three interrelated activities, we can arrive at a description of a major part of the professional field of graphic design.

Various models and descriptions are already available for each group of activities on its own. The consideration of alternatives for each group remains necessary in order to judge which models are best suited to describe a group.

### Boundaries of the profession

We can now also define the boundaries of the professional field more clearly, even though they are not fixed. We have found that designers tend to position themselves close to the core activities of the profession, while placing different accents on related activities.

Typographers, photographers, illustrators, strip cartoonists, copywriters, cartographers and infographics artists generally are somewhat farther away from the core activities of the profession of graphic design, as they are not directly involved with the combination of the four core functions (**identity, orientation, representation, context**).

Although they, too, design and combine the same visual elements and meet with both clients and beholders, choosing a visual strategy is less prominent for them. This is not to say that the groups mentioned above never consider visual strategies in specific situations, but this would be an exception rather than the rule.

In an abstract sense, one could say that the activities of visual artists also conform to the tripartite model of desired **effects**, visual **goals** and visual **elements** mentioned earlier. The main difference with graphic design is of course that in visual art there hardly ever is an external client with a strategic communications goal, nor are there beholders who should be approached in a specific manner.

The most problematic dividing line, however, is that between 'advertising' and 'graphic design'. These two fields have so much overlap (advertising agencies design house styles and graphic design firms engage in promotional activities) that this aspect calls for further study, both from a historical perspective and from the point of view of current practice.

### Specialisations

The inventory also shows that the designer or design firm cannot possibly master 'the entire profession'. The number of possible activities is simply too large and they are too diverse. Designers and design firms therefore must choose which activities to offer to their clients. Our research shows that there is commercial interest in many combinations of activities.



Figure 19  
A digital 'Telephone directory' of KPN as available on the website [www.telefoongids.nl](http://www.telefoongids.nl). The four core functions – identity, representation, orientation and context – are just as recognizable in a digital design.

design Eric Numans (Studio Puik), Martijn Hinfelaar.

In each of the three groups of activities, there are specialists. Some designers emphasise the visual elements, the visual strategy or the visual effects. Within these groups, further specialisation may occur. The fact that these specialisations are commercially available shows that clients appreciate them.

Designers also feel that it is essential that they are familiar with the domain in which their client operates. As they collaborate longer with the same client, they of course become increasingly knowledgeable about that domain, which makes it attractive for other clients from the same domain to engage their services. A graphic designer's first successful commission often determines the direction their career will take.

## 5 The relationship between the professional field of graphic design and available knowledge and research

On the basis of the structured description of the professional field, we can try to apply the available theoretical frameworks to the field of graphic design.

The three questions mentioned show a certain similarity to the three ways of reasoning in argumentation theory. I will attempt to briefly describe them here.

### **Logic**

the formal rules of reasoning.

### **Rhetoric**

the theory of effective speaking and writing and of the art of persuasion.

### **Dialectics**

form of reasoning that divides a representation into opposing judgements, in order to later make these oppositions come together in a new unit of a higher level of meaning than the original thought.

These descriptions strongly resemble the three questions that graphic designers ask themselves:

1

Which visual elements are required?

The 'visual logic': choosing and combining visual elements. Selecting, developing and combining visual elements is done through visual logic.

2

Which visual strategy seems most suited?

The 'visual rhetoric': the strategic appliance of visual means. The combining of the four core functions can be related to the rules of effective 'speaking and writing', if we replace these with their visual equivalents.



What are the goals of the clients and of the beholders – what are the effects?

The ‘visual dialectics’: the dialogue between client and beholder.  
The dialogue between client and designer also fits within the definition of dialectics.

We may now describe this professional field as follows:

**Graphic designers develop arguments for visual dialogue based on a combination of visual dialectics, visual rhetoric and visual logic.**

Our next task is to translate the mainly verbal literature (i.e., **words**) on dialectics, rhetoric and logic into a **visual** world, that is, into the practice of graphic design. The structure allows for a more specific search.



Figure 20  
The displays of mobile phones answer the same questions as to effects, visual goals and visual elements. The visual logic, visual rhetoric and visual dialectics serve to support a visual dialogue between the beholder and the product.

## 6 Graphic design education

On the basis of the description of the professional field, students are able to make well-informed choices about the position they wish to take later, and, guided by the study programme of their educational institution, they can select the most efficient path toward that position. They can even do so in a variety of ways. One student may want to build on the knowledge of the work of predecessors, another student may prefer to work on the basis of his or her personal experience. If the first student finds out that studying predecessors does not lead to applicable results in the present, he can still switch to that other source: his own individual characteristics. And if the second student comes up against his limitations, he can always resort to older professional knowledge in order to deepen his own. The inventory shows that both working methods are appreciated in practice.

Through these new insights into the core activities of the profession, it is now much easier to build up educational assignments in increasing degrees of difficulty. The model also offers an excellent structure for evaluating students' work, because now we can first discuss the three questions independently and later in relation to each other, in view of a goal-oriented visual argumentation. This allows for more systematic evaluations.

Our interviews with designers clearly show that graphic design is never isolated, but is always part of an activity (project) or system. Right away, we stumble upon the fundamental problem of assessing the ‘effects’ of graphic design. In the real world, it is virtually impossible to determine the effects of the specific contribution of the graphic designer after the fact; in experimental research, this is only possible in very small measure.

It also becomes apparent from the structural description of the professional field why it is so difficult to write about graphic design. The visual logic is often quite obvious, but how do we deduce a visual strategy from a design? Without a thorough knowledge of the client, the designer, and the intended goals, it is impossible to discuss a design’s effects. This is why many graphic design competitions go no further than making a quick judgement of the design’s visual logic. And without insight into rhetoric and dialectics, even that logic is in fact impossible to fathom.

In his conclusion to **Graphic Design: A New History** <sup>(2007) 40</sup>, Stephen Eskilson writes:

**The question remains: what is the purpose, other than the obvious day-to-day work of meeting deadlines and serving commercial clients, of contemporary graphic design?**

The results of this study show that this question can be answered. In each situation, the three questions are asked again, and the three methods of argumentation are considered anew.

There is so much diversity within the field of graphic design that it is impossible to define a general goal that may serve as a guideline for every situation.

## 8 Conclusions and prognoses

Albeit cautiously, we think that our research warrants the following conclusions:

1

There is indeed enormous diversity in the commercial practice of graphic design. Differences between firms are huge. Similarities mainly concern the value placed on the importance of the relationship with the client, the resources that are used, and the goals that are targeted. Our inventory presents a fairly clear image of the professional field, with core activities surrounded by numerous other activities by graphic designers, activities that are, however, related to the core activities.

2

The various categories and figures from professional journals and statistical publications are incompatible with actual situations such as in Breda.

The professional practice of graphic designers differs too much from the categorisations that are standard. If the existing systems of classifications are not revised, they are of little practical value for our profession. It is confusing when graphic designers can only be put in a category for 'website design' or permanently grouped with 'illustration design'.

3

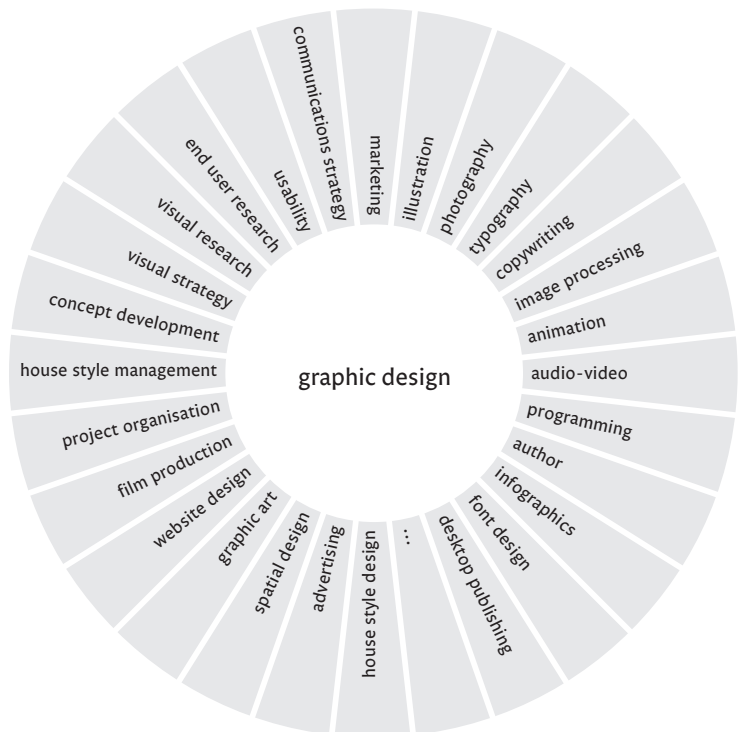
The commercial practice of graphic design in Breda is functioning very well. In all, around 170 firms and about 700 graphic designers make their living from graphic design, showing obvious passion and enthusiasm.

4

Existing prejudices – that in Breda we are dealing with the marginal design firms of aging St. Joost students who paste together brochures for small and medium-sized businesses – have not been confirmed. In any case, the results present a much more professional image of the graphic design practice in Breda.<sup>41</sup>

5

Graphic designers can, and should be, much clearer about their criteria, methods and activities. This is in everyone's interest: that of graphic designers themselves and their clients, and also that of design educators. We have to be especially explicit about the fact that each graphic designer chooses his own position as to which criteria he – or she – applies, the methods he follows, and the activities he chooses, and that these views may be diametrically opposed to the views held by others.



40 Stephen J. Eskilson (2007, p 421) **Graphic Design: A New History** London: Lawrence King publishers.

41 This observation from the practices research may be explained by socio-geographic and personal aspects, but a too regional interpretation of the contacts between designers and clients is contradicted by the divers influx from other schools as well as by the 'nation-wide' commissions carried out by the design firms we interviewed.

Figure 21

**The activities of graphic designers:**

- selecting and combining visual elements
- balancing the relations between the four core functions
- considering the effects for clients and beholders.

As I already warned at the beginning, our study is no more than an initial exploration. If the above conclusions seem a little strongly phrased, I have done so only to stimulate you and myself to engage in further research, to either corroborate or qualify these statements.

Visual communication research prognoses:  
logic, rhetoric, dialectics

Again, we have described the practice of graphic design in terms of visual argumentation. Whether this leads to the most adequate description of present and historical practice here and elsewhere is still an open question – for me as well. For now, however, I see possibilities of working with this descriptive method and using it, for instance, to approach the following seven areas of research.



Figure 22

Design and context: a book adaptation becomes a box office hit and the publisher jumps on the wagon by releasing a translation. In the first dust cover (by Karel Thole) free illustration reigns. Because sales are disappointing a second design is tried (by Will van Sambeek). Here photos and sanserif typography are dominant and the image seems to be taken from the film. Van Sambeek was strongly influenced by an internship in Switzerland, which shows in the montage of lower case letters of the Akzidenz Grotesk font.

J. Braine, *Plaats aan de top* [Room at the Top], Leiden 1959/60. Source: Jaap van Triest in *Loodvrij en digitaal*, Alphen a/d Rijn 2001

# *Seven possible areas of research*

1

**Further research into the results of graphic design in practice.**

For instance, case studies of the design and usage of **information on prescription drugs** and **free daily newspapers**.

2

**Determining the position of graphic design in debates.**

Examples of such debates are ‘innovation’, ‘the creative class’ and ‘doctoral degrees in the arts’.

3

**The effects of graphic design can now be more accurately mapped because the interests and stakeholders are known.**

Although they are becoming visible in an increasingly wider context, the effects of any graphic design on clients, designers, beholders and society can be studied with the description as a starting point.

4

Evaluation of a new product. At the first presentation, both designers and clients are nervous. The designer hopes that his or her work will be accepted by the client. For the client, it is an exciting moment, as something new will be revealed even though it remains as yet unknown whether it will be the optimal visual solution to their needs.

**The arguments presented at the first presentation of a design probably provide good insight into the motivations of both graphic designers and clients. Which arguments are used at these presentations and what are they based upon?**

5

The influence the relationship between designer and client has on the design. The importance of this relationship cannot be stressed enough. It seems obvious that the results will be better and quicker when the designer and the client share a similar frame of reference; for instance, because they come from the same background or have the same education.

**Is it possible to produce good designs from relationships between clients and designers of very different backgrounds?**

6

**Access to literature.** With our description, we can make the professional literature more easily accessible to graphic designers working in the field, and, vice versa, provide insight into what is happening in professional practice to theorists and other writers on graphic design, such as critics and historians.

7

The reader is very seldom heard – and even then, the applied categories are much too broad. With our conceptual framework, we can study the beholder’s role and responses in a meaningful way. **The role of the beholder and his judgement have hardly been given any attention in practice so far.**

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(Simple will do), politeness, performance  
(together: constructionism).

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# A brief bibliography

For those who are interested in graphic design, the following ten titles provide an introduction to the field:

Alice Twemlow (2006)

**What Is Graphic Design For?**

Mies, Switzerland: Rotovision

Malcolm Barnard (2005)

**Graphic Design as Communication**

Abingdon (UK): Routledge

Paul Martin Lester (2000)

**Visual Communication. Images with Messages**

Belmont (CA): Wadsworth/Thomson Learning

Gunnar Swanson (editor) (2000)

**Graphic Design and Reading. Explorations of an Uneasy Relationship**

New York: Allworth Press

Jan V. White (1988)

**Graphic Design for the Electronic Age**

New York: Watson-Gustily Publications

Adrian Shaughnessy (2005)

**How to be a Graphic Designer Without Losing Your Soul**

London: Laurence King Publishing

Johanna Drucker & Emily McVarish (2008)

**Graphic Design History: A Critical Guide**

Upper saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall

Jorge Frascara (2004)

**Communication Design. Principles, Methods and Practice**

New York: Allworth Press

Paul Mijksenaar (1997)

**Visual Function. An introduction to information design**

Rotterdam/New York: O10 Publishers/Princeton Architectural Press

Jonathan Baldwin/Lucienne Roberts (2006)

**Visual Communication. From Theory to Practice**

Lausanne: AVA Academia

The Visual Rhetoric Research Group publishes a series of readers. Each reader introduces a specific aspect of the professional field by combining five or six annotated essays. For more information, please visit the website [www.visueleretorica.nl](http://www.visueleretorica.nl)



Figure 23  
The visual representation of Europe on EU coins and banknotes varies. The coin shows three islands south of Spain. On the banknote the north coast of Africa is displayed at that geographical location. It is unclear whether any meaning should be attached to this difference in visual representation.

## About the author

Karel van der Waarde studied graphic design at the Academy for Industrial Design in Eindhoven (graduated with honours, 1986). After obtaining his Masters degree in Information Design at Leicester Polytechnic (with honours, 1987), in 1994 he obtained his PhD at the University of Reading ('An investigation into the suitability of the graphic presentation of patient package inserts'). In 1995, he started a business aimed at researching visual information, specialised in developing and testing information about prescription drugs for patients, doctors and pharmacists. The firm also studies forms, signposting, textbooks, annual reports and instruction manuals. Since June 2006, Karel van der Waarde holds a position at the Visual Rhetoric Research Group of AKV | St. Joost, Breda. He is a life-fellow of the Communication Research Institute (Australia), a board member of the International Institute for Information Design (IIID, Vienna) and editor for *Information Design Journal* and *Visible Language*. He writes, edits and reviews articles, conference presentations and publications.

## With special thanks to:

research group office AKV | St. Joost Breda:  
Rens Holslag, Wilma Diepens (Vera Bekema, Annemarie Quispel)

the researchers:  
Maurits Vroombout, Bart Eerden

the research assistants for the Visual Rhetoric Research Group:  
Koen van der Weide, Martijn de Wilde, Désiré Dujardin,  
Mariëlle van Genderen, Rob van Leijsen, Anouk Zalm

the circle of advisors to the Visual Rhetoric Research Group:  
Mark Schalken, Jaap van Triest

the fellow lecturers at AKV | St. Joost:  
Flip Bool, photography lecturer since 2006  
Camiel van Winkel, visual art lecturer since 2006  
Hugues Boekraad, visual rhetoric lecturer 2003-2005

the management of Avans and AKV | St. Joost, Breda and Den Bosch:  
Jules van de Vijver, Jeroen Chabot, Frans van Kalmthout

The research on which this publication is based was financially supported by Foundation Innovation Alliance (SIA). The practice research partners are:  
Smidswater: Geert de Jong / Herman van Olphen ([www.smidswater.nl](http://www.smidswater.nl))  
Babs Baay Grafisch Ontwerpbureau: Babs Baay ([www.babsbaay.nl](http://www.babsbaay.nl))  
Corps 76: Kenny Soekarnsingh ([www.corps76.nl](http://www.corps76.nl))  
Itidentity: Ingrid Bastiaansen ([www.itidentity.nl](http://www.itidentity.nl))  
Studio WenK: Bert Wang ([www.wenk.nl](http://www.wenk.nl))  
Vos Ontwerpbureau: Margriet Vos ([www.vos-ontwerpbureau.nl](http://www.vos-ontwerpbureau.nl))

## Colophon

text: Karel van der Waarde, PhD  
editorial advice: Felix van de Laar, Rens Holslag, Jaap van Triest  
translation: Leo Reijnen (with thanks to Jane Bemont)  
illustrations and image selection: Karel van der Waarde, Rens Holslag, Jaap van Triest,  
except the illustrations 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 19, 20, 22, 23  
plan of Breda (figure 4) with thanks to Yurr Rozenberg  
graphic design: Jaap van Triest  
printing: Thieme, Deventer  
publisher: © 2009 Avans Hogeschool   
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supplement to the publication: **Grafisch ontwerpen: luisteren naar de lezer?**  
isbn/ean 978-90-76861-20-3